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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: UNICEF SIGNS NEW AGREEMENT ON CHILD LABOR WITH  
GOVERNMENT

REF: TASHKENT 327; 08 TASHKENT 1256

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On April 6, the Ambassador met with a visiting UNICEF representative from Geneva, who reported that UNICEF would sign a new Annual Work Plan with the government that fleshes out several key points from the September 2008 National Action Plan (NAP) on the elimination of child labor. Under the Work Plan, the government has agreed to implement a public awareness campaign to change social attitudes on child labor and to allow UNICEF to conduct studies, among other measures. Arguing that 2009 had the potential to be a "transitional year" in the fight against child labor in Uzbekistan, the representative argued that authorities should employ returned Uzbek labor migrants to pick cotton instead of schoolchildren. The representative believed that UNICEF's policy of engagement has already paid dividends, while arguing that threats of a boycott could derail further progress. We fully agree with these sentiments. End summary.

UNICEF DEPUTY REGIONAL DIRECTOR VISITS UZBEKISTAN

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¶2. (SBU) On April 6, the Ambassador had dinner with Geneva-based UNICEF Deputy Director Shahnaz Kianian-Ferouzgar, UNICEF Representative in Uzbekistan Mahboob Shareef, and UNICEF Child Protection Officer Siyma Barkin, who briefed him on UNICEF's recent efforts to engage the Uzbek government on combating the use of child labor during the annual fall cotton harvest, a long-standing practice from the Soviet era that is still carried out to varying degrees in all Central Asian countries.

UNICEF TO SIGN NEW WORK PLAN WITH GOU ON CHILD LABOR

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13. (SBU) Kianian-Ferouzgar reported that she traveled to Tashkent to sign an Annual Work Plan between UNICEF and the Ministry of Labor for 2009. The Work Plan describes 2009 as a critical "transitional year" in the effort to eliminate the use of child labor in Uzbekistan and fleshes out several key points from the government's September 2008 National Action Plan (NAP). The Work Plan envisions that various government partners, including the Ministries of Education and Labor and the Presidential Apparatus, will play a leading role in its implementation. According to the UNICEF representatives, it took five months of careful negotiations with officials to come to agreement on the document.

#### OUTLINE OF WORK PLAN FOR 2009

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14. (U) Kianian-Ferouzgar provided the Ambassador with an outline of the 2009 Annual Work Plan, which highlighted several of the Plan's key action points for UNICEF and the government, including:

1) Building the capacity of the Labor Ministry to better monitor

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the implementation of the NAP on child labor;

a. Establishing a child labor working group within the Ministry of Labor;

b. Strengthening the Labor Ministry's coordination mechanism for overseeing NAP implementation through regular meetings, reporting, and other measures;

2) Improving understanding of the scale of child labor in Uzbekistan;

a. UNICEF is to conduct a study on social benefits provided to vulnerable children to assess their effectiveness in alleviating poverty and preventing child labor;

b. UNICEF is to conduct a "knowledge and attitudes" survey to assess the awareness of children, parents, government officials, and farmers regarding existing legislation on child labor and to clarify their attitudes towards child labor and the value of education (Note: While UNICEF representatives stressed the importance of such a survey, they also noted that it was not intended to replace a full-fledged independent assessment of the use of child labor during the cotton harvest, to which the government has not yet agreed. End note.);

3) Raising awareness of child labor and relevant national and international legislation;

a. Implementing a wide-ranging public awareness campaign to change

social attitudes on child labor and to increase the population's knowledge of children's rights;

b. Developing and distributing awareness-raising materials through appropriate channels such as farmers' associations, schools, local hokimiyats (administrations), local departments of labor, and branches of the Human Rights Ombudsman's office (Note: UNICEF representatives reported assisting the Education Ministry develop relevant anti-child labor materials. The Ministry shared the materials with us during a meeting in February and said they would be distributing them to all schoolchildren in Uzbekistan this year, see ref A. End note.);

4) Building the capacity of relevant government bodies to address child labor;

a. Conducting a series of trainings for labor inspectors, local officials, teachers, school administrators, prosecutors, police, farmers, and Human Rights Ombudsman staff;

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5) Sharing international best practices on how to address the worst forms of child labor;

a. Exposing government officials to international best practices and effective methods for preventing the worst forms of child labor;

b. Promoting information sharing between Central Asian countries on child labor and developing joint solutions;

6) Promoting community-based prevention;

a. Empowering local communities to prevent child labor through cooperation with local Mahallas (neighborhood committees).

OTHER RECENT UNICEF ENGAGEMENT WITH THE GOU

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15. (U) UNICEF representatives explained that in the lead up to the signing of the Work Plan, they held a series of meetings with government officials to develop the next Program of Cooperation between the government and UNICEF for the 2010 - 2015 period, in which child labor has been identified as a priority area.

16. (U) In December 2008, at a Cabinet of Ministers meeting chaired by Deputy Prime Minister for Social Issues Rustam Kasimov, Acting Minister of Labor and Social Protection Aktam Khaitov expressed his desire to continue collaboration with UNICEF on eliminating child labor. At a January 2009 follow up meeting between Khaitov and Shareef, the government agreed to the Work Plan and the action points outlined above.

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17. (SBU) Shareef reported that during the January meeting, he stressed to Khaitov the importance of inviting an International Labor Organization (ILO) representative to Uzbekistan and to identify areas in the NAP which ILO could help implement. Recently, Khaitov has told UNICEF that the government is "now considering" inviting an ILO representative to Uzbekistan. Khaitov also reportedly stated that he would go to Moscow to meet with ILO "if invited."

KILLING TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE?

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18. (SBU) Kianian-Ferouzgar observed that one potential consequence of the current financial crisis and the corresponding loss of employment among Uzbek labor migrants in Russia and Kazakhstan is a lower prevalence of child labor in Uzbekistan. She believed that the Uzbek government should develop a plan to use unemployed Uzbek labor migrants - who have been returning to the country in droves - to pick cotton during the harvest instead of schoolchildren. At the same time, the government would be providing much needed income to unemployed labor migrants and their families, thus helping to quell any potential unrest in rural regions over socio-economic conditions. Kianian-Ferouzgar said that she planned to raise this possibility with officials during her visit. UNICEF representatives also observed that the participation of schoolchildren in the annual cotton harvest was driven in part by rural poverty. They noted that many rural residents, both adults and children, earned a significant amount of their families' annual income each year picking cotton during the harvest.

19. (SBU) UNICEF representatives noted that another factor which might result in decreased incidence of child labor this year is the government's recent decree on increasing food production, which has resulted in a decrease in the amount of land devoted to cotton cultivation. Land that was previously used to grow cotton is now being used to grow food crops, whose cultivation in Uzbekistan has not traditionally involved child labor.

EXPLORING MECHANIZATION AS A CHILD LABOR SOLUTION

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110. (U) The UNICEF representatives debated the potential pros and cons of promoting the greater mechanization of Uzbekistan's cotton harvest as a potential alternative to child labor. They noted that the level of mechanization in Uzbekistan's agricultural sector has declined significantly since the Soviet era. If Uzbeks were to purchase new combines and tractors, there would be less need for manual labor during the harvest. However, they noted that given the lack of employment opportunities in rural Uzbekistan, it may be wiser for the government to raise wages to attract greater numbers of adult cotton pickers, many of whom currently head to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to pick cotton, where they are paid more. The type of high-quality cotton grown in Uzbekistan is also susceptible to damage by harvesting machines, lowering the price Uzbekistan would receive for its cotton on the world market. Shareef suggested that the Uzbeks experiment with planting other strains of cotton that are less likely to be damaged by mechanical harvesting.

## THE EXAMPLE OF TURKMENISTAN

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¶11. (SBU) The UNICEF representatives cited Turkmenistan as an example of a Central Asian country which has made great strides recently in combating the use of child labor during the cotton harvest, partly through increased mechanization. They noted that

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high-level Turkmen officials, including President Berdimuhamedov, have made clear statements against the use of child labor in the local media, while Turkmen authorities have purchased a new fleet of combines and tractors for the harvest. Kianian-Ferouzgar observed that while the use of child labor during the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan might still be continuing at some level, it is clear that schoolchildren are at least picking cotton for much shorter periods of time than before.

## UNICEF CITES ENGAGEMENT AS KEY TO BUILDING MOMENTUM

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¶12. (U) While UNICEF representatives allowed that the threat of an international boycott of Uzbek cotton might have encouraged the government to adopt legal reforms, they believed that such threats have outlived their usefulness. Instead, they argued that continued engagement with officials was more likely to lead to further progress. The representatives explained that child labor in Uzbekistan was a complex problem that could not be solved overnight. Instead, they argued that any effective solution would take time and need to address wider issues, including economic development, agricultural reform, labor migration, and unemployment. The UNICEF representatives also stressed the importance of having multiple interlocutors - including international organizations like UNICEF and ILO, NGOs and human rights groups, the United States and European countries, and retailers - deliver a clear and consistent message on child labor to the Uzbeks, which will resonate more in Tashkent. The UNICEF representatives also noted that one key partner with whom to pursue closer coordination is the International Cotton Advisory Council (ICAC).

¶13. (U) The UNICEF representatives argued that their engagement with officials over the past few years has gradually built momentum within the government to address its child labor problem. As proof, they cited several examples of how their efforts have led to positive change. For example, in a response to a January 2008 letter from Foreign Minister Norov, UNICEF recommended that the government adopt ILO Conventions 182 and 138. After the government voted to adopt the ILO Conventions in April 2008, UNICEF advocated for the government to develop a plan for their implementation, which resulted in the National Action Plan (NAP), the government's first systematic mechanism for the elimination of forced child labor in Uzbekistan. UNICEF provided input for the draft NAP on several occasions, including during a roundtable chaired by Minister of Foreign Economic Relations Elyor Ganiev in July 2008. The NAP was eventually signed by the Prime Minister in September 2008 and was immediately followed by the Labor Ministry sending letters to the Farmers Association and the Education Ministry advising them not to use of child labor during the cotton season - the first time such instructions were ever issued by Tashkent.

¶14. (U) The UNICEF representatives reported that their organization carried out a series of child labor-related trainings for local officials and others in 2008. With technical support

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from ILO, UNICEF provided training on children's rights and child labor to 175 local administrators in 9 out of Uzbekistan's 14 regions, as well as to 2,000 students and teachers from 700 schools in five regions of the country. UNICEF provided workshops for journalists on how to distinguish legal work involving children from forced child labor. As part of its program creating a Children's Parliament in Uzbekistan, UNICEF provided information to parliamentarians on child labor and also conducted a "training of trainers" for youth leaders.

UNICEF SHARES REPORT FROM INFORMAL MONITORING IN 2008

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¶15. (U) During his January 2009 meeting with Khaitov, Shareef reported sharing the results of UNICEF's informal monitoring of the 2008 fall cotton harvest. He also shared with the Ambassador a written report based on those field visits (UNICEF had earlier provided an oral briefing on those field visits to foreign diplomats last fall, see ref B). Shareef noted that the Labor Ministry publicly announced that it was undertaking its own field monitoring, but has not yet released any results.

¶16. (U) UNICEF conducted its informal monitoring by visiting eight provinces (Tashkent, Syrdarya, Jizzakh, Navoi, Samarkand, Bukhara, Kashkadarya, and Ferghana provinces) between mid-September and mid-October 2008. It asked questions to a random set of children and adults in cotton fields, schools, local administrative offices and other locales. According to its written report, UNICEF found students participating in the cotton harvest in all eight provinces. At most sites, it was reported that only college students were initially involved in the cotton harvest, but younger schoolchildren were mobilized starting in the third week of September. Weather forecasts predicting heavy rains from the beginning of October (earlier than normal) and the consequent need to accelerate the harvest processes were reported by interviewees to be the main reason why younger schoolchildren were eventually mobilized. In some areas, the greater availability of adult labor in 2008 resulted in a lower prevalence of child labor than in previous years.

¶17. (U) During the harvest, local residents reported that younger children worked in the cotton fields mainly after school hours. In contrast, children from the eighth grade and higher and college students appeared to pick cotton an average of eight hours a day with a one hour lunch break. In a few isolated regions, monitors found that schools were completely closed during the cotton harvest. College students traveled home at night if they lived near the fields; otherwise they stayed overnight in nearby shelters, usually school dormitories.

¶18. (U) Families reported in Tashkent and Kashkadarya provinces that school administrators threatened children with lower grades if they refused to pick cotton. Some respondents were aware of measures undertaken by the government to reduce child labor in 2008



and supported such efforts. In general, though, respondents saw the involvement of children in cotton picking to be a practice which was either necessary or a normal component of children's education and social development. Some children, especially older ones, appear to see their involvement in the cotton harvest as part

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of their normal duties, or sometimes even as "something fun to do."

¶19. (U) UNICEF concluded that the scale of the phenomenon and age of children picking cotton varied considerably among locations, including those within the same province and district, and appears to be influenced by a variety of factors, including: the quality and quantity of the local cotton harvest; the availability of adult labor; variations in weather; and specific arrangements between schools, farmers, and/or local officials. Only college students were observed picking cotton in Kashkadarya and Ferghana provinces. Schoolchildren as young as the eighth grade were observed picking cotton in Syrdarya province; as young as the fifth grade in Tashkent, Jizzakh, Samarkand, and Navoi provinces; and as young as the first grade (7 years old) in Bukhara province.

TASHKENT UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE PLANS VISIT TO WASHINGTON

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¶20. (U) Shareef reported that he would attend a conference in New York City at the end of April. While in the United States, he expressed interest in traveling to Washington to meet with U.S. State Department officials to share his insight on child labor in Uzbekistan. Shareef also was interested in meeting with other organizations, including ICAC.

COMMENT

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¶21. (SBU) We agree with UNICEF that 2009 is potentially shaping up to be a "transitional year" in the fight against child labor in Uzbekistan. The government's decision to sign the Work Plan with UNICEF is a significant development, and we will continue to monitor its implementation throughout the year. In particular, if the government were to implement a public-awareness campaign on child labor similar in scale to its current campaign against trafficking-in-persons, it would greatly increase awareness regarding children's rights and legislation prohibiting child labor among local officials and the general population. We also agree with UNICEF that continued engagement with the government is the key to eliciting further progress on child labor and that any effective solution will take time and would need to address wider issues. There are much more effective tools for combating child labor in Uzbekistan than threats of a boycott (which is likely to hurt most those it is intended to help), including promoting the use of former labor migrants to pick cotton instead of schoolchildren. The government's decision this year to grow less cotton may also lead to less schoolchildren picking cotton in 2009. We will urge the government to continue cooperation with UNICEF on implementing the Work Plan and NAP, to invite an ILO representative to Uzbekistan, and to allow an independent assessment of the use of child labor during the cotton harvest.

BUTCHER